

COMMISSIONERS APPROVAL

CHILCOTT *gc*

LUND *BT*

THOMPSON

TAYLOR (Clerk & Recorder)

Date.....August 1, 2006

Members Present.....Commissioner Greg Chilcott and  
Commissioner Betty Lund.

Minutes: Sally Fortino

Commissioner Thompson was in Washington, D.C., to testify before Congress.

The Board of County Commissioners met for a briefing on current fire conditions. Present for the update were Dixie Dies, Forest Service, Public Information Office; Ron Nicholas, DEQ; Charmelle Owens, Public Health; Sheriff Chris Hoffman; Forest Service members: Dave Bull (Director), Dan Ridder, Doug Terban, Jack Kirkendahl and Tom Dobberstein, Victor Fire District

Jack discussed the impact of drought conditions and temperature on the probability of forest fires. These factors are in addition to the human element. He distributed situation reports to the Commissioners.

Commissioner Chilcott asked about the cause for the Gash Creek fire. Jack said they haven't determined the cause yet. August is expected to be normal, as far as temperature is concerned, which means the fire potential will be high. Cooler weather patterns advance the possibility of fire control. Nationally, we are at Preparedness Level Five. All available hand crews are committed, as are aircraft and equipment crews. Initial attack capabilities: additional engine and crew modules are available. They are trying to beef up initial attacks; when fires are caught in initial stages they can be quelled more readily. They frequently work in large fire support and initial attack phases. There has been excellent support and cooperation from local volunteer fire districts and the Sheriff's Department, as well as coordination with Forest Service law enforcement. If there are multiple starts, the fires will be prioritized, out of necessity.

Dave Bull said the committed resources show 500 crews, 10,000 fire fighters, 1000 engines, and 150 helicopters now deployed. All resources are stretched. Fire season stretches for another six weeks. Dave said he attended a public meeting in Victor. He shared some of the rumors regarding the recent fire starts and how they are being fought. The Forest Service dispatch received the call at 4:15; the helicopter was off the ground at

4:25 and over the fire at 4:30. More engines were ordered from Darby; fire retardant was ordered and on the fire within an hour. Crews worked nonstop through Tuesday night. Local Volunteer Fire Departments sent 18 engines to the site. Public safety is the primary focus and keeping the fire off private land.

Doug Terban said he got the call late Tuesday; the team was on the road that night or early Wednesday. They were able to take over the fire sooner than would normally be the case. The objective was to anchor one side of the fire and prevent travel. The day crew spent most of the day holding what the night crew managed. The south side of the fire ended in an old prescribed burn. The plan is to let it roll into the creek bottom and work up, putting it out. They spent most of the day chasing hot spots. The '209 Report' gives updates and lists resources in use. South of Big Creek to Bear Creek is the area of closure right now. Roadblocks close Red Crow, Pleasant View, Smith Creek and Sweathouse.

Commissioner Chilcott asked how the winds are affecting the fire fighting efforts. Doug said visibility is affected.

Dave said he was asked why helicopters do not drop water in the morning, when it is cooler and the humidity is higher. He answered that there has been a national limit set on the duty hours of helicopters. Therefore, there is a need to save hours in reserve for situations that might occur later in the day.

Sheriff Hoffman said his department couldn't tackle the investigations into fire starts with their resources alone. Partner agencies in the Valley have offered help; they have received considerable resources from the Forest Service and have set up a cooperative effort with the investigator from the Forest Service. He hesitated to characterize all the fires as arson, but said they would be treated that way until proven otherwise. He said he is really impressed with the job every one has done. Charmelle and Ron have been available at all hours. Evacuation went smoothly because of help from the Victor Fire Department. The response to the Woodchuck fire went smoothly with Missoula County Personnel. Most of that fire is in Missoula County and we were able to assist with efforts.

Tom said the County should realize that only 20 acres of ground burned within the Victor Fire District. Most of what Victor Fire District has done has been outside their district. Agreements are in place with the Forest Service and DNRC; when the season is over it will have to be determine who is going to cover the costs (George Corn arrived at meeting). Cooperation between departments and services organizations has been exemplary.

Commissioner Chilcott asked about trouble evacuating families. Tom said the second one on the road wouldn't evacuate. They prefer to get people out of the way for their own safety, and so the strike team doesn't have to deal with cattle, goats, sheep, etc. They had 21 engines ready in ½ hour.

Ron said he was impressed with the cooperation between departments and resource providers.

Charmelle said the smoke has been an issue. Air quality issues have come up. They are working with one displaced family. Everyone is doing a great job. Most residents are appreciative of their efforts. Officers who have been dispatched to residents have done an excellent job. Communication has been great.

Sheriff Hoffman said his department is getting feedback on the amount of information available. People are pleased with the availability of information. Charmelle agreed.

Commissioner Lund asked if the state of the SEAT base at the airport is causing a problem. Jack said it would have been nice to have it finished, but they can deal with present circumstances without a problem.

In other business, the Board of County Commissioners discussed Stage Two Restrictions. George Corn, Dave Bull, Dan Ridder, Jack Kirkindahl, Tom Dobberstein, Ron Nicholas and Charmelle Owens were present for the meeting.

Commissioner Chilcott said several citizens indicated Stage Two Restrictions impeded the performance of regular duties on their farms/ranches. Permits won't be efficient or effective.

Ron said agriculture has been exempted because it is adversely affected by not being able to do things in a timely fashion. He received a call from Northwest Energy, asking if they could continue using equipment after 1 PM.

George said permits were granted for agricultural operations in 2000.

Commissioner Lund said they worked with the fire districts.

Dave said technically they cannot do restricted activities after 1 PM.

Tom said they don't have the manpower to enforce it, but the DNRC has been doing it for years.

Dave suggested allowing the exemption on national forest land, requiring that the person have water with them; these requests are usually for roadwork. Grant permission if they have water with them and someone who stays behind 2 hours after all engines are stopped. Getting into a permit system could be overwhelming.

Ron said Bob Reed suggested if the work could be done prior to 1 PM, do the work according to the restriction. If it must be done after 1 PM, seek a permit.

Jack said the document lends the opportunity to enforce, if there is a need to enforce. George said the ability to shut down someone would be immediate.

Ron said an exemption should be required if someone is bailing hay in forestland. Commissioner Chilcott wondered if George had a recommendation. Selective enforcement makes legal problems.

George said one was passed in 2003.

Commissioner Chilcott said there should be a stipulation regarding a water source.

Ron said restrictions include the County Road Department and public utilities.

George said, referring to hours of operation, a statement should be included referring to, 'unless the operator is hired by a professional organization or member of the agricultural community.' Include operating an internal combustion engine off any maintained or designated road.

Dave suggested using the language in the Forest Service document. George agreed.

Tom said most private citizens have no fire extinguishers. A great majority (95%) of what they deal with would be no problem if individuals had fire extinguishers.

George suggested that they add a statement mandating that haying equipment include a fire extinguisher. That should be for burning, too. Add it to the agricultural operations regulations.